

Importance of Forest For Development of Greater Lumbini Area

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Abstract

Major events of Gautama Buddha from the birth to Mahaparinirvana took place in the forest. Buddha spent most of his life in the forest and gave sermons. The teachings of the Buddha state that one can be free from suffering and attain peace only if all the elements of nature, including the forest, are protected and used judiciously. His followers have been adopting nature-friendly Buddhist practices till now. The Lumbini Garden, the birthplace of the Buddha, is now being developed as a center of world peace. With Lumbini at the center,



work is underway to bring the concept of a larger Lumbini for the protection and development of Buddhist sites from Kapilvastu to Ramgram. Despite huge investments in physical development, the Buddhist environment has not been created in these areas, which creates obstacles to the expansion of Buddhist philosophy and taking advantage of tourism from Buddhist sites. Due to the lack of forests in the greater Lumbini area, a Buddhist environment is not being created. The development of greater Lumbini can be made sustainable and fruitful if a Buddhist environment is created in the forests in this area and various kinds of forests are grown around the Buddhist sites. This article discusses the problem of lack of forest for Buddhists and the problem of lack of forest in the greater Lumbini area.

Keywords

Buddha, Greater Lumbini, Forest, Tourism

Forest and Society

Trees, plants, and forests are the best gifts given by nature. Forests play an important role in keeping the earth alive. From the microscopic vegetation found in the forest to the tall trees and from the micro-organisms to the gigantic creatures, they have helped to make the earth beautiful. Since forests carry out ecosystem sustainability, conservation of water resources, clean air production, and exploitation of toxic gases, the earth's environment has remained balanced and clean. Human life on earth is possible because of these trees and forests.

Since the development of the human race started from the forest, the forest and human society have been interdependent. Forests have been helping people in economic, social, and spiritual development. People are fulfilling their traditional needs such as the increase in agricultural production, animal husbandry, collection of timber food, and collection of herbs from the forest. People have been earning income by selling forest products, while forest-based industries have been helping in areas such as employment growth, import-substitution, and revenue growth. Forest-based eco-tourism has flourished in recent years. As the number of people who want to enjoy nature away from modernity is increasing every year, the attraction of tourists in the forest area is increasing and developing countries like Nepal have started benefiting from it.

Forests have a high place in every culture. Especially Hindu and Buddhist culture has been very close to the forest. Religious and cultural activities are carried out close to the forest, using forest produce. Since forests contribute to spiritual development and peace of mind, forests are given high importance in Buddhist philosophy. From Buddhist society to modern society, the philosophies, practices, and ethics related to forests and vegetation have been equally important in Buddhist philosophy.

Buddha and Forest

The Buddha and the tree are very strongly connected. The Buddha was born under the tree of Ashoka (also known as Sal, Pipal) in the beautiful Salvan (called Lumbini Upavan) between Kapila and the Koliya kingdom. After leaving home, the Buddha spent most of his time in the forest in search of Wisdom. It was during this time that he attained enlightenment in Bodh Gaya while sitting under the Bodhi tree. According to the Mahaparinirvana Sutta, after attaining enlightenment, the Buddha sat under the same tree for seven consecutive days. He also gave his first sermon in the forest at Sarnath. It is mentioned in the Buddhist literature that Buddha taught under various trees during his lifetime. In the end, Buddha also attained Mahaparinirvana under the Salvriksha in Kushinagar (Gosling, 2001).

Buddha attaches great importance to the entire living world. He has mentioned planting trees, making gardens, building bridges, and dug wells in the forest under the joint body as a way to attain heaven. It is also known from the Mahavagga Pali of Vinayapitaka that the Buddha gave great importance to the forest. Non-violence is the essence of Buddhist philosophy. The Buddha has emphasized that not only animals but also plants should not be harmed. It has been termed as a parajik crime for the monks to cut down a tree in the patimokhya of Samyuktanikay. Similarly, it is considered a crime to destroy trees and plants without any reason in Pachittiya. The rules of Varshavas have been determined so as not to affect the plants growing in Mahabug Pali.

Buddhist forest

Various types of forests are mentioned in various Buddhist literature including Tripitaka, Jataka Katha, and Attakatha. When Buddha traveled, he mostly lived in Amravan, Amalak van, and Aranyavan. Many such forests are mentioned in Vinay Pitak's Mahavagga Pali. The following forests are mentioned in various Buddhist literature.

a. Amravan (3 in Rajagriha, between Pawa and Kushi Nagar, and in Kamanda), b. Ambapalivan (Baishali), c. Ambatak Forest (Bajji), d. Anjanvan (Saket), e. Andhavan (near Shravasti) f. Ichchanagga Forest (Koshal), Jetwan (near Shravasti), Jatiya Forest (in Bajji Rashtra), g. Kappasiya forest h. Kalandkanivaya (in Rajagriha), i. Latthivan, j. Lumbini van, k. Mahavan (extending from Kapilvastu to the sea through Vaishali), l. Madrakukshi Forest (in Rajagriha), m. Peacock Garden (in Rajagriha), n. Nagavan (Bajjima), o. Sispavan (in Koshal), p. Shitvan (in Rajagriha) q. Upavattan Salvan (in Mallarashtra), r. Veluvan (in Rajagriha) , s. Anupiya-Ambavan (in Malla Rashtra).

The following are the forests directly related to the life of the Buddha (Bidari, 1996).

1. **Jetavana:** Jetavana was the forest belonged to prince Jeta of Sravasti. According to the Mahapadana sutra Anatha pindika, a merchant purchased that forest and built three monasteries (Kareri Kuti, Kosamba Kuti, and Gandha Kuti). One Salalaar Kuti was constructed by king Prasenjit and these monasteries were presented to Lord Buddha and the community of monks. Lord Buddha preached Lakshena-sutra and seventy Sutras of Majjima Nikaya in this forest. According to Anguttara Nikaya and Buddhavamsa Lord Buddha spent his twenty-one to forty-five rainy seasons (Varsabash) in this forest (at Gandakuti).
2. **Nyagrodhvana:** According to Attakatha (Manoratha Purani) of Anguttara Nikaya and Buddhavamsa Attakatha (Madhurattha vilasini) mentioned that Lord Buddha spent his fifteenth rainy season at Nyagrodhvana of Kapilvastu. This is the place where Lord Buddha met his father Suddhodana for the first time after the enlightenment. Here, Lord Buddha preached the five sutras of Majjima Nikaya. This van is visited by the Chinese traveler Yuan-Chwang in the seventh century A.D. and mentioned in his travel account.
3. **Mahavana:** There were three Mahavanas of Vaisali, Urubela, and Kapilvastu as mentioned in the Buddhist literature.

(a) Mahavana of Vaisali: Mahali sutta mentions that Lord Buddha was seen in the Kutirasala of Mah?vana at Vaisali and spent forty-sixth rainy season in this place.

(b) Mahavana of Uruvela: This place was within the Malla kingdom and Lord Buddha visited here many times. According to the Anguttara Nikaya Lord Buddha told Ananda about this forest and Lord Buddha spent five years following five Brahmin's preaching before enlightenment.

(c) Mahavana of Kapilavastu: Various Buddhist sutras have mentioned this van. Attakatha of Vinaya-Pitaka is very important for the geographical history of the Buddha period. This history especially for the Mahavana of Kapilvastu gives a detailed description. This van extended from Himalaya to Vaisali thus this was called Mah?vana of Kapilavastu.

4. Lumbini Forest

Lumbini Vana: According to Pali literature Lumbini van was lying in between the Kapilavastu kingdom to the west and Devadaha kingdom to the east. Divyavadāna gives a detailed description of this forest and mentions that Lord Buddha was born in this forest under an Asoka tree. Both the Chinese travelers Fa-Hsien and Yuan-Chwang in the fifth and seventh centuries A.D. visited this place and named it La-Fa-ni Grove. There is no uniformity in the naming of this van (Gautam, 2017).

5. Venuvan:

(a) Venuvana of Kajangala: Anguttara nikaya states that Lord Buddha spent a lot of time in this forest. Pali Tripitakas mention that Venuvana of Kajangala was the eastern boundary of the central kingdom.

(b) Venuvan of Rajgriha: In this forest Lord Buddha preached various sutras of Majjima-Nikaya. According to suttanipata and Sumangala vilasini, king Bimbisara met Lord Buddha at Rajgriha and presented Venuvana (Bamboo Grove) to him and the monk community. Vinaya Pitaka further tells that there were other forests too, they were Jivakarna Vana, Latthivana, etc. Lord Buddha spent his second, third and fourth rainy seasons at this Venuvana.

6. Amravana:

According to Panchasudini Amravana near Rajgriha was presented to Lord Buddha by one medicant Jivaka. This place was so peaceful and tranquil that ven. Rahula (son of Siddhartha Gautama) spent most of his time in this forest.

7. Ambapali van:

Various Buddhist literature has described this van which was situated south of Vaisali. Lord Buddha before traveling to Kushinagar for his Mahaparinirvana he spent the last year of his life in this van. Before he traveled to Kushinagar, Lord Buddha accepted the food offered by Amrapali the owner of this van, and she presented this van to Lord Buddha and the monk community. Both the Chinese travelers visited this place and Yuan Chwang even mentions in his account that he saw that particular place from where Lord Buddha had observed Vaisali for the last time.

Forests in the greater Lumbini area

Lumbini, the birthplace of Gautam Buddha, Kapilvastu, his hometown, Devdaha, the maternal home of Buddha and Ramgram, the place where Buddha's relics are located, is the major Buddhist sites in Nepal. Kapilvastu, the birthplace of Krakucchanda Buddha and Kanakmuni Buddha, is considered an open archeological museum. These places are in Nawalparasi (West), Rupandehi, and Kapilvastu which are under the Greater Lumbini area. These areas are preferred for agriculture due to the fertile soil and irrigation facilities in the state and easy access to India, transportation, and other physical facilities.

Until half a decade ago, most of these districts were covered with dense forests, but due to increasing human pressure in the last decade, there are only limited areas of forests. Kapilvastu district has 36.92 percent or 60 thousand 969 hectares of forest and saplings. In Nawalparasi (West) 2197 ha. (30.3 percent) is covered by forest and saplings. 25508 ha of Rupandehi district. (19.54 percent) of the area are forest and sapling. Although some of the forests in the middle of these districts are visible, most of the forests have shrunk in the northern part of the district (MoIFE, 2076).

Most of the municipalities in the greater Lumbini area have forests in very small areas. Forests cover only 3.5 percent (474 hectares) of the total land area of Kapilvastu municipality in the Kapilvastu district. Although there is no forest in Kapilvastu municipality, Kapilvastu has been able to take the environmental benefit as there is the forest in Buddhabhumi municipality connected to Tilaurakot. There is no forest in Lumbini Cultural Municipality except within the Lumbini Development Area. Although there is a thin forest of Gaidhawa municipality near Lumbini, it is 17 km away from the natural forest. Devadaha municipality has 53.8 percent (7352 hectares) of the forest. Most of the forests of Devadaha are in the Chure hills north of the East-West Highway. The Ramgram Municipality, which has the Ramgram Stupa, has only 0.5 percent (48 hectares) of forest (DoRFS, 2018). There is a good natural forest in the western part of Sunwal Municipality, which is close to Ramgram, which is about 12 km away from the Ramgram Stupa area.

Problems caused by Lack of Forest in GLA

Since forests play an important role in livelihood, ecological balance, and cultural environment, these aspects are directly affected by less availability of forest. The main problems seen in the Greater Lumbini Area (GLA) due to lack of forest are as follows:

A. Challenges in Preservation of Archaeological sites:

Until the 1960s, most of the Buddhist archeological sites in these three districts were covered with forests. People used to fetch firewood from the same forest and run their daily activities. After clearing the forest nearby, the locals have started to meet their needs by clearing the forest and saplings at the archeological site. Many archeological sites are unprotected, making it easier to extract firewood and soil. Even in important areas that have been protected and fenced, the work of secretly cutting grass, firewood, and extracting soil is going on. Such acts have exacerbated problems such as erosion of archeological heritage, alterations, and theft of heritage.

B. Effects of domestic and wildlife:

As there is no forest nearby, there is a problem of domestic and small wild animals grazing in the monument/ archeological area and destroying the plants there. Due to the lack of forest, the farmer-wildlife conflict has increased when wild animals such as swallows and foxes in the Lumbini area reach the farms of local farmers. Lumbini's identity crane is also in crisis due to inadequate forest and wetland.

C. Landslides and river erosion

Landslides and river erosion problems have started appearing in the greater Lumbini area due to deforestation. Buddhist sites in Tilaurakot, Ramgram, and Devadaha are at risk of river erosion. The Nigali Sagar of Kapilvastu, Lambu Sagar, Devadaha Pokhari of Devadaha, and Panditpur area of Nawalparasi are at risk of landslides.

D. Environmental pollution:

Air pollution in the region has been found to be the main culprit in discrediting Lumbini, the center of world peace. Air pollution in the Lumbini area has been discussed nationally and internationally in the last decade (Rupakheti, Dipesh and et al.2016). Air pollution has increased due to smoke and dust emitted from various industries in Mayadevi Rural Municipality, road construction work in the Lumbini area, and traditional farming of farmers around Lumbini (BBC, Pollution has been more alarming due to lack of greenery in the Lumbini area. Air pollution has affected the identity of Lumbini and other structures including Ashoka Pillar.

E. Impact on tourism:

Tourists visiting Lumbini want a clean and quiet environment. Rising air pollution in and around Lumbini has frightened tourists. Larger concrete structures are being built in Buddhist sites than in a quiet and green environment. As tourists do not stay in such structures, tourists do not stay in Lumbini, Kapilvastu, and other places for long. This is the reason why even though we have world-famous Buddhist heritages, we are not able to take advantage of tourism.

F. Influence on Buddhist society:

The Buddha inspired his followers to practice in the quiet environment of the forest. In the early days, monks and nuns lived in the forest is mentioned in Buddhist literature. Many Buddhist monasteries in Myanmar and Thailand are still in the forest. However, as there is less forest in the greater Lumbini area, the monasteries are operated in the settlement areas. Since there is no Buddhist environment, monks, nuns, and other worshippers are facing problems. Some of the forests in the GLA have a limited number of monasteries, but these monasteries are built-in community or government-managed forests, the monasteries are not able to create a natural environment according to Buddhist philosophy and conduct their activities.

G. Impact on Buddhist population expansion:

The indigenous communities/ Janajati of Nepal are the main Buddhist community. 94.43 percent of the total Buddhist population of Nepal is of Tamang, Magar, Gurung, Newar, and Sherpa castes (- CBS 2014). Janajati prefers to live near water (rivers or lakes) and forests. According to the 2068 BS census, the Buddhist population in Ramgram Municipality is only 818. Similarly, there are 5746 Buddhists in Devadaha Municipality, 71 in Lumbini Cultural Municipality, and only 107 in Rakpivastu Municipality. In Sainamaina Municipality, which is believed to be an ancient Buddhist city, there are 3,457 Buddhists (Kandel 2020). Looking at these statistics, it seems that Buddhists have not been like to settle in the less forested areas. Although 2396099 Buddhists are living in Nepal, the number of Buddhists in major Buddhist sites in GLA is insignificant, which slowed down the spread of Buddhist philosophy and the development of Buddhist sites.

Forest development in Buddhist sites

Since forests are needed to create a Buddhist environment in Buddhist sites, Buddhist countries around the world are adopting various models of forest development. Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand have given forest management rights to the Buddhist Sangh. In the mountainous region of Nepal, monasteries have done exemplary work of forest and wildlife conservation. As there are no dense Buddhist settlements and Buddhist Sangh in the greater Lumbini area, it is necessary to develop forests in these areas to create a Buddhist environment before implementing Buddhist-based forest management. Some ways to increase greenery and forest in GLA are as follows.

A. Religious Forest -

According to Article 28 of the Forest Act 2076, religious bodies or communities established following the prevailing law for the protection of ancient religious sites and their surroundings can be handed over for protection as a national forest as an areligious forest. According to this arrangement, some part of the forest in the greater Lumbini area can be converted into a Buddhist religious forest. Buddhist associations can be

allowed to manage as a religious forest by planting trees in the areas of Banganga, Tinau, Danda, Rohini, Jharhi river. In the Lumbini garden area too, old and imported trees and shrubs can be removed and Buddhist trees can be planted to make religious forests.

B. Urban Forest -

Urban greenery is very scarce in Toulhawa, Lumbini, and Ramgram. Due to which the city and the surrounding area look ugly. In these places, according to the Urban Forest Development Procedure Guidelines, trees can be planted along roadsides, private and institutional vacant lands, and private lands to make the city beautiful and the environment clean.

C. Forest in Buddha Circuit -

Tilaurakot-Lumbini-Devadaha-Ramgram areas are now being connected by the Buddha Circuit. The small forest can be developed on vacant lands on both sides of the Buddha circuit by planting trees based on Buddhist and Buddhist culture. The greenery along the road will attract tourists. (Shrestha, 2010).

D. Agricultural forest and private forest

Kapilvastu, Lumbini Cultural, and Ramgram municipalities have ample private land which is not cultivated or has been abandoned. A private forest can be developed on these lands as per Article 35 of the Forest Act 2076. The National Agriculture Forest Policy 2076 and Forest Policy 2075 have provided various facilities to assist in private and agro-forest development. If the local government, provincial government, and divisional forest offices help the locals to plant such forests, good forests can be grown in these areas within a few years. Such forests not only create a clean, hygienic, green environment in Buddhist sites but will also help in generating income by fulfilling the needs of the locals related to forest production. Once the forest is planted on private land, the process of collecting firewood from the natural forest and nearby monuments will be stopped, which will contribute to the protection of forest and archeological heritage.

Conclusion

It has been 125 years since Lumbini was discovered. The search for Buddhist sites and heritages in Lumbini and its environs is still going on. It has been 43 years since the master plan for the development of Lumbini was started. Even after such a long time, the Buddhist sites from Kapilvastu to Ramgram have not been made attractive and well-organized religious and tourist sites. Until now, only concrete construction has been given priority in the name of development, so ugly concrete structures have been added to Buddhist sites like in the city. As human settlements are added and physical construction works are carried out at a rapid pace, the surrounding trees, plants, and greenery have dried up. It is destroying the beauty and spiritual atmosphere of Buddhist sites. Lack of greenery has adversely affected tourism and Buddhist traditional activities and has added challenges to heritage conservation.

Buddha's life and philosophy are based on the forest. Non-violence, peace of mind, and relief from suffering are the mainstays of Buddhist philosophy. For this, the Buddha has emphasized the proximity of human beings to forests, flora, and fauna. The Buddha has left a message to meet the needs without harming animals and plants. Forests are a great help in following the Buddha's path. Forests also play a key role in the development, protection, and beautification of Buddhist sites. The Buddhist spiritual and natural environment will not be

ready until the forest is not developed in the Greater Lumbini Area. Until there is a lack of the Buddhist environment, it will be difficult to preserve Buddhist sites, expand Buddhist philosophy and take advantage of tourism from the Buddhist heritage.

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(The author has been involved in forest and environmental research and writing for two decades.)